



UNDERSTANDING HUMAN RIGHTS THE LEGAL AND MORAL OBLIGATIONS TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS

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Lesson Description

Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled. How we define and defend the rights of all humans is based on treaties and customary law that nearly every nation on the planet has adopted. In this lesson, we will look at the evolution of human rights law and treaties that outline the minimum legal standard of treatment that must be afforded to everyone.

Lesson Overview

1. What do we mean when we say “human rights”?
2. What are the foundations of human rights law?
3. What are the moral obligations to protect human rights?

Discussion Questions

1. If human rights are inherent to all human beings — universal and interrelated, interdependent and indivisible — why is it important to enshrine human rights principles in law?
2. The lesson discusses some of the key historical events that have shaped human rights ideology (the trans-Atlantic slave trade) and formed the basis for modern human rights law (World War II and the Holocaust). What are some of the key historical events that you see that have determined the course of human rights in your community? How have these events advanced or regressed the protection of human rights?
3. The resources section for this course includes documents and links to several international human rights treaties and covenants. Review the documents and their specific articles, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. Why do you think that international bodies and governments have continued to create additional human rights documents? Why is it important to continue to review and revise the laws surrounding human rights?
4. What is the role of government in protecting the human rights of its citizens?

Developmental Actions

(Special note: Any actions, communications or activities taken on behalf of human rights very much depend on the context of the status of human rights in individual countries. YALI Network members should make a personal assessment of their ability to engage in these activities.)

1. Read the key international human rights treaties and covenants.
2. Review your country's constitution and identify its human rights protections; compare them to the international treaties and covenants and identify inconsistencies.
3. Learn how your country's leaders — those representing government and nongovernmental organizations — stand on the principles of human rights. Review the ways in which they are promoting the rule of law with regard to human rights.

About the Presenter

Mary Kalemkerian is a Human Rights Officer in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Peace Missions Support Section (Field Operations and Technical Cooperation Division) where she contributes to the integration of human rights in United Nations peacekeeping operations and political missions, carrying out strategic planning for human rights teams and providing advice on human rights mandate implementation. She supports the creation of new peace operations through conceptual planning on human rights and similar mandates, design of new human rights components, as well as advising on mission mandate revisions and transitions for existing peace operations. Mary holds a Master of Arts in International Relations from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

